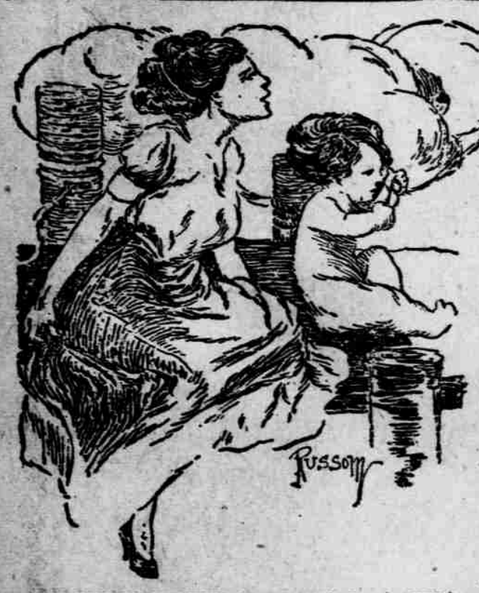
OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



MY ROMANCE

BY OWEN OLIVER

A STORY WRITER is never what you expect from his writings.

I have come to the conclusion that the writer is not to blame for this. A man is not easy to find. I did not find myself till a year ago, and then it was through a book of mine.

It was my fourth novel, "John Dormer," which set me thinking. I was continually going over the scenes between Felicia and John. And suddenly the truth dawned upon me, John Dormer was myself; and he had done what I wanted to do.

The main point, and the point of likeness to myself is that John was a prosperous, practical man of forty, unsuspected of sentiment even by himself. In a moment of self-analysis he discovered that his prosperity did not content him; that all his life he had hungered for romance; and he went out from his countinghouse into the world and found—her!

I did not quite reach the point of owning to myself that I wanted romance, or expected to find "her." I put it that I desired to get outside the four walls of my study and "see life"; to travel and learn to know the world.

A few years earlier I could not have taken such a trip, if I had wished to; but now there was no reason why I should not. Five years before I could not have afforded it. Eighteen months back I could not have left my two little children. (I was a widower.) But now I was well to do, thanks to the spinnings of my brain, and I had no uneasiness in leaving the children with the charming lady who presided over my house. She was not very old—about twenty-eight—but she was very capable. She was goodness itself to my little ones; and it was their fondness for her which had induced me to ask her to come and take care of them, when her worthless husband died, and left her penniless; that and my desire to help her, and my liking for her.

"You will understand, Beatrice," I said—I had known her since she was a child, "that I don't wish you to be just a superior housekeeper, or a head nurse. I want you to be a—let us say a young aunt, or a big sister, to the children; to be the lady of the house, and make the house a home for them. So you must make the house your home too, and feel at liberty to enjoy yourself. Will you come and see if you can be happy with us?"

"How kind you are!" she had cried. "Indeed I will come! And I will make it a happy home for them; and for myself"—she held out her hand with her pretty smile—"and for you."

She had kept her word, and made us all very contented and comfortable. The children ran about at her skirts and adored her. The servants competed to please her—she was one of those women who are fond of servants, and make their servants fond of them—and I found her a companion to me, as well as to the children. She took as keen an interest in my affairs as if they were her own, and saved me every labor that she could take upon herself. She kept my accounts and made out the checks for me, and even entered up the records of my stories, and wrote business letters for me. I proposed to give her a power of attorney to manage my affairs while I was away. She frowned and pursed her lips when I suggested it; but after a moment she smilingly consented.

"I am rather frightened," she owned; "but, of course, I shouldn't like you to choose anyone else instead. I shall do my best. And you won't grumble. You never do."

"You never give me the chance," I said. "Thank you!"

"It is I who have to thank you," she insisted. "I—I do, you know."

So it was settled; and I arranged to go first to South Africa, by the Union-Castle Line; and then back to Marseilles by the East Coast route; and then to take a trip round the Mediterranean home.

Beatrice brought the children—Bob was eight and Elsa was six—to Southampton to see me off. My last recollection was of her buttoning up Bob's overcoat—there was a cold wind—and putting a wrap over Elsa, and then standing with one arm round each, as the ship moved away.

"God bless them!" I muttered. "All three of them! —If I met a woman like her!—Well, now for life!"

I did not like to say "romance"; but that was what I meant. In plain English I intended to marry again, if I found the right woman; the woman who is in all my tales. She is always the same—the lover and comrade of the man. That is all that matters.

But it matters very much, and I meant to make quite sure that I had found just this woman, before I married her. I had made one mistake which had imbittered the best years of my life, and I was determined that I would not make another. I was no longer a boy to be carried away by a pretty face and a touch of moonlight, I told myself. I could weigh a woman in the balance; and I would—before I fell too far in love with her.

In the earlier portion of the voyage I weighed Miss Marvain; the first really clever woman I had ever met. She had traveled much, and read much, and thought much, and colored it all with her original and kindly personality; she was good-looking and good-humored. But she was—at any rate outwardly—less soft-hearted than I liked a woman to be; and she did not care for music or for children. My idea of her received a blow when she sang flat at the second Sunday's service—Beatrice was a delightful singer and had rather spoiled me. The ideal was killed when she shrugged her shoulders at my playing so much with the children on board.

The second lady to be weighed was Mrs. Richards; or rather I think she weighed me. She was a soft, smiling little widow, who loved to have the babies round her, and stitch away at rag dolls and dolls' clothes for them. She played everyone's accompaniments, and, though she always said that she had no voice—and hadn't—she sang plaintive songs so delightfully that you never thought about the voice, only the singing. But when I asked her to sing one song, she put it aside, with a sad little smile.

"That song is dead," she said, "with something else in me. We became great friends—after that; and I told her more about myself than I had ever told anybody—even the reason of my travels—and she looked at the stars—it was a warm tropical night—and nodded.

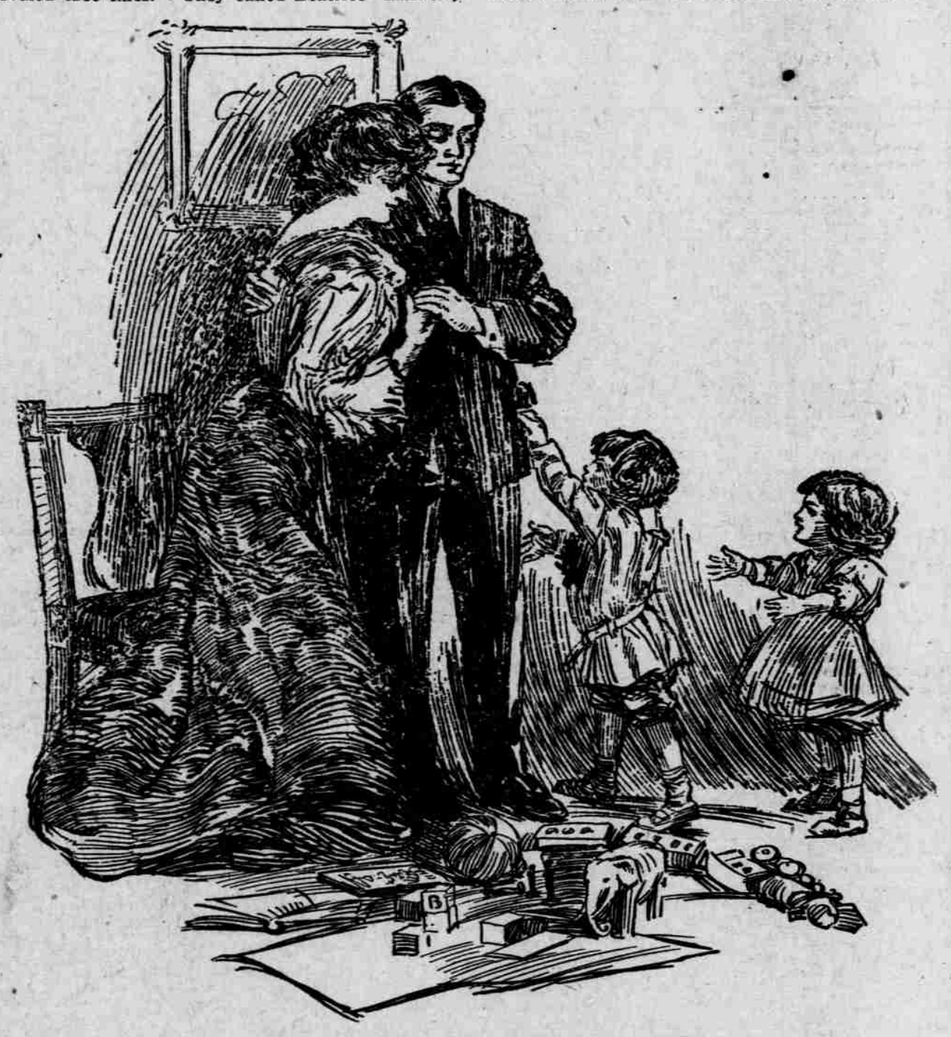
"You see," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands, "I am not good at expressing myself, but—you just love some one—or you don't. I don't think it is any use looking for a particular ideal. Some day you may find some one perhaps, and—she may be quite different, but—she will alter your ideal so easily. ack wasn't what I expected before I knew him; or even when I thought that I did—but—I cannot make up stories like you can; and I expect it will sound ridiculous to you, but—but I make up one little story so often. I think that Heaven is just—just a gate in a lane—where it begins; and I find Jack waiting there; and he says—'You've been a confounded long time coming, old girl; but I knew you'd come all right.' He'll never worry about my thinking of anyone else. Never! And I know he's waiting there; fidgeting with his mustache as he always did, if he was kept waiting——"

She looked up at the stars and smiled; and I knew that I had learned one lesson, at least, by coming out of my study.

After that I abandoned the deliberate quest of romance.

I spent a pleasant week at Cape Town, at the Queen's Hotel—and began to wonder whether romance was coming to me in the shape of one—I wasn't sure which—of three bonny sisters; jolly, unaffected girls, half Dutch and half English, born to make happy homes for some lucky fellows, as I have no doubt they have or will. But, when the English mail arrived, I understood how little these nice women really mattered to me. Beatrice had sent an amateur photo of the children and herself; and when I put it beside a snapshot of the ladies at the Queen's, she looked like a race horse beside cart horses. They weren't common-looking girls either. It was simply that she had set my ideals a terribly high standard. She was such a pretty, graceful woman.

The children's letters made me feel very homesick. Bob's was written by himself, "but arnty rouled thee lines." They called Beatrice "auntie.")



"THEN YOU IS A DOOSE, AUNTIE!" ELSA CRIED.

Elsa's hand had been guided; but Beatrice assured me in her pleasant letter that the composition was Elsa's own. "You may feel quite sure," she concluded, "that the children are well and happy, and that you will find everything right on your return home. I hope you are finding your temporary habitations as comfortable as home. I am mean enough to hope not more comfortable!"

I wrote and assured her that no place could be so comfortable as she had made home for all of us.

After that I went up country for a fortnight, but did not find friends and became very dull and lonely. If there is a place in the world where one needs human companionship, it is South Africa.

During that dreary fortnight I seemed to dwell in a world aloof, coming nearest to companionship with a broken-down man of seven languages who was head waiter at a hotel. "The Transvaal is the best place in the world," he told me, 'for leaving!" I took his advice and went on to Natal two days earlier than I had intended, so as to arrive there as soon as the mail, I had two weeks' mails at once; two pairs of dear little letters from the children, two batches of papers from Beatrice and two long double letters from her; for she wrote separately about business and home affairs. "So, you see," the last one concluded, "I am managing all right. It is a great pleasure to manage things for you. I always remember that you have given me, not a situation, but a home. Thank you!"

After that my voyage to Europe seemed only the means to an end. As I met my letters I became more and more impatient to be home again. On the way from Egypt to Marseilles my impatience became positively worrying; and when I reached Marseilles, and received my letters there—one in faltering round hand, and one "guided," and two from Beatrice—I cut out the Mediterranean cruise and went straight home overland.

I was going to telegraph at first, but I decided to take them by surprise, as an additional pleasure. I arrived at the house at three in the afternoon, and walked round the back to the French windows unobserved. Then I heard voices and peeped in. Beatrice was sitting in the drawing-room, with Elsa squeezed in the armchair beside her, and Bob leaning against her knees, telling them a story. The children looked bonny, but Beatrice seemed a trifle pale and thin, though she looked prettier than ever. I always considered her the prettiest woman I knew. I was afraid that she had been overworked and worried; and my heart went out to her with a warmth that I had never felt in my play at romance.

"The dear woman!" I thought. "How sweet she is!"

The story was about two little children, "such nice little children," who had "a very dear daddy"; and he went away and came home. It was delightful to hear her fresh voice, and to watch her face while she told it.

"When he came," she said, opening her eyes and holding up her hands, "he brought them 'ourteen presents; one from every place he had been to"—I had told her that I intended that. "Just fancy! Fourteen lovely, foreign, funny presents!"

"And fourteen for their auntie," Bob suggested.

"No-o," she demurred, with her fingers to her lips. "An auntie couldn't expect so many as that; but I dare say he brought her some, because—he knew that she did her best. He was a very kind daddy, and he loved the little children very much."

"Didn't he love their auntie too?" Elsa inquired.

Beatrice laughed a funny little laugh. (How I like that laugh of hers!)

"Did she love him?" Bob wanted to know.

"Bob," said Beatrice, "that's six questions since I began this story; and five are enough for any little boy. Let's go out to the park and feed the swans."

They jumped up; and then Elsa saw me and gave a scream of delight; and I gave a shout and ran in. The children rushed at me and caught hold of me; and so did Beatrice. She was very flushed and pleased and smiling. Her eyes blinked a little too.

"You dear daddy!" the children cried.

"I am so glad," Beatrice said.

"You dear children!" I cried and hugged them. "And you dear woman!" I added. I squeezed her hand for a long while; and she grew pink.

"How many presents, dad?" the children demanded, pulling at my jacket.

"There will be fifteen each," I said, "when I've bought those for the places I didn't go to after all. Some are coming afterwards; but I've brought four each in my bag."

"That's one more than auntie said," Bob pronounced.

"Auntie is a goose," I stated. "She left out one place—home! The best place of all—since auntie came to us." I looked at Beatrice and she dropped her eyes. I couldn't remember where I had found that look before; and then I discovered. She was—Felicia!

"That was—goosey," Bob agreed; "but auntie isn't a goose, because"—he considered—"because she's handsome."

"She is!" I agreed.

"Oh, you sillies!" she cried.

"She said," Elsa began, "she ackshully said that you didn't——"

"Elsa!" Beatrice cried, and grabbed at her, but she dodged behind me with a laughing scream.

"She finked you didn't love her!" Elsa concluded.

"Ah!" I said. "But I do!"

And in a moment my arm was round Beatrice, and her head was on my shoulder. I could only kiss a pink ear.

"Then you is a doose, auntie!" Elsa cried, and clapped her chubby hands.

"Yes," she agreed. "I'm a goose—such a happy one!"

Our hands closed together tightly; and I knew that I had gone hunting the world for my romance—and all the while the sweetest romance, since the world began, was waiting for me at home.

The First Generation

By FREDERICK ORION BARTLETT

THE bell tingled and a maid brought in the card of Robert Wainwright. A few touches of her hair and dress, a hurried glance in the mirror, and Marion was standing before him, hand outstretched. As they faced one another, it was clear to be seen that she was easily in control. Yet she met him with an eagerness which he detected and reflected in his dark eyes.

In a few moments she was bundled from head to foot and all the opportunity the sharp wind had at her was in the few steps from the door to the carriage. Even then it had to pass Wainwright first, who clung to her arm as though fearing she might be blown away into space.

That was one thing he always made her conscious of—protection. Sitting there by her side in the carriage he somehow impressed upon her—with almost needless insistence—that, so far as man could, he would always stand between her and all things disagreable. Oftentimes this extended to the point where it irritated her.

She broke several dangerous silences with laughing nothings and so reached the house safely—safe from the crisis that menaced her. Once she swept through the door into the music and laughter and chatter, she seemed to blend herself with it and lose all sense of self.

She had always liked his people, better than she liked his friends. As she crossed the room to meet them, she felt a little thrill of satisfaction. She was glad to be there. But this gladness was apart from Robert himself; it was associated with that first generation, with that thickset father and his tense, willful lips; with the kindly mother with her patient, loyal face.

Both of them greeted her affectionately, and she stood there by their sides for a moment enjoying the music, listening to the rustle of silken skirts, soothed by the sight of the heavy curtains and soft pictures, by the lights and perfumes and sparkle of jewels. It was to her, for the moment, as though she had never seen all this before It came in upon her with initial piquancy.

It was only when Mrs. Wainwright, while the gentlemen were at their cigars, sat down beside her that she was at all conscious of being in Robert's home.

"Your gown is quite the prettiest here," whispered the mother.

The girl would have resented the compliment from anyone else. As it was, she blushed prettily with pleasure.

"I think it must have gathered something from mother," she said frankly. "It is made over from her wedding gown."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Wainwright, "that is the trouble in having sons—we women can't live over our youth again in them."

The girl leaned forward with sudden interest.

"You must have had a beautiful youth, Mrs. Wainwright."

"Yes, dear. It is pleasant to look back upon it now. But there were many bare places along the road—many times when the clouds hung low."

"But you fought your way on—struggled and won."

"Ben and I," she corrected.

"And that is the beauty of it! It is what must make all this seem so good to you now."

Her eyes had brightened and her mouth grown tense. She heard the mother saying:

"You, my dear, will have no bare places in your life. We, of the first generation, have all our recompense in looking on at the lives of our children. The thought that Ben and I may have suffered a little for others brings a new pleasure to us now."

The girl impulsively placed her soft fingers upon the withered hand.

"I would rather have had your life than any I know of," she said.

On the ride back it was still the face of the mother which was uppermost in her mind. Robert was very tender of her, but she felt not the slightest sense of intimacy with him. She parried all his overtures with the keeness of one fighting back the inevitable. But as they stood before the fire in her own home again, he broke through her guard.

"Marion," he said, "it is useless to pretend any more; I love you. I—I think you have known it a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And you love me—a little?"

"I don't know," she said.

"I have waited so long. And mother," he laughed lightly, "mother says she has waited twenty-five years! She loves you. Come to me," he ran on eagerly, encouraged by her silence and the drooping eyes. "The home is all ready for you. Everything in the world shall be yours. You'll not a dream that the three of us will not try to make come true."

She looked up at him a moment, her blue eyes warm with affection. In his pleading eyes she caught a suggestion of the eyes of his mother. It came to her like a shock that she—this other woman who was Robert's mother—would not have accepted this offering. It was a David and a David's life that she had chosen, and it was that which made her what she was.

"Robert," she said, with a quick intuitive flash she knew she would never call him "Bob," "I can't answer you to-night. It is only fair that I should, but I can't unless I say 'No.' I am not sure enough of myself to say Yes."

"I will wait," he cried. "Don't say 'No.'"

"Then good night," she said quickly, holding out her hand.

"Good night," he whispered. At the door, he turned.

"And a 'Merry Christmas' to you."

"Christmas?" she faltered. "Why this is Christmas eve!"

II.

Marion stood peering out the window into the confusion of snow and darkness, as the time approached for David's arrival. At length she saw, as part of the mist itself, a form which somehow she knew was his long before she could clearly distinguish it.

"Are you all ready? You'll need to bundle up well, girl, because there isn't any carriage."

"I'm glad of it. It will do me good to walk."

"I am taking you to 'Le Petite Oiseau,'" he said as he assisted her from the car, "and not a dozen people outside the comfortable French in the city know of its existence. You will probably only get a dinner of herbs as compared with last night. But this is home to many who come here and home to me."

They turned down a tiny side street, and then into a warm lighted doorway. Just a single long cozy room with a few dozen tables along the two walls. This evening the place had been made jolly with holly and evergreen, and with big wreaths tied with scarlet ribbon at the window. The stout proprietor and his buxom wife had for this evening gathered together a small orchestra from among their friends and between the selections its members sat down with the guests and drank their good healths. Monsieur Bartol greeted the two as they entered with a "Merry Christmas," and was followed by Madame Bartol, smiling and echoing him. Then came Pierre to place their chairs for them, beaming with as much pleasure as though they were his own guests.

The chatter, laughter, and clatter of dishes at once put them in good spirits. Marion felt not so much one of a company as one with a company, and David seemed very near to her and very much a part of her happiness.

"Christmas has just begun for me," he said. "All day long I have been in the midst of it—have watched others glow with the peace and joy of the day—but somehow it hasn't struck home. It has been," he laughed, "like looking upon another's romance."

"I wished you with me yesterday," she said in reply.

"Did you? It is the possibility of your wishing me near when I cannot come that sometimes makes me rebellious with my work."

"But you love your work, David?"

"Yes," he said as Pierre came up with the soup, "I love it because of the struggle. You fight so for all you accomplish."

"Do you never get discouraged?"

"I don't know." He hesitated. "I get lonesome. Perhaps that is the same thing."

"But you get so little for it all. At the end of the day, you have so little for reward!"

"At the end of the day," he said slowly, "I have my dreams. And it is those which make it all worth while. They put red blood into pale duties; they give a biting zest to life. It is like turning your eyes from a dull sky to a flaming sunset. They make you feel that you are yourself—an individuality—as distinguished from any who ever came before or who will come after. It is the winning of things more than the things themselves which makes life worth living. And Marion—I feel somehow that the same spirit is in you somewhere. When things go the worst I seem to see you with me and feel that you would enjoy even the sting of it."

"There are those," she said shamefacedly, for her quick breathing almost denied the words, "there are those who are so fond of contentment that they fear to risk for happiness."

"There are those," he said, "who do not know themselves."

"Madame does not like the soup?" asked Pierre, frowning a little.

The dinner was good—so good that she was conscious of enjoying it as she had not done for months. And the company was good—so good that she remembered each and every face afterwards. And the music was good—so good that, after everybody had joined in the choruses and several others had been persuaded to give solos, she to her surprise, rose and sang a Christmas carol in a way that won the applause of the evening.

"I feel now," she said, "as though I had discovered a new country. I—I wish I had something to do in it. Tell me more of the work you are planning. I—I guess I must do my work at second hand."

He told her quite simply at first, but with such growing interest that she began to feel as though she really did have a part in it.

And then David choking back words he felt he scarcely had the right to utter, exclaimed out of a full heart:

"How you could help a man!"

Her heart began to pound in a quite surprising manner. The whole world seemed to snap out of the darkness. The blood leaped to her cheeks—the strength to her arms.

"How I would try!" she answered.

"Marion, could you? Can you dream dreams and fight for dreams and love for dreams?"

"Yes," she said. "And to make them come true, as you have made Christmas come true to me."

And after he found her hand there was really little more left to be said.

"When I came here," she confessed, "I thought I had a mighty problem on my hands. And—it isn't a problem at all! I have found that I—I belong to the first generation, David!"

"God bless you," he said, half choking.

As they rose, all those remaining in the room rose, too, after the manner of the guests at 'Le Petite Oiseau,' and wished them a "Happy New Year." But it was Pierre who knew. He knew, when as he was putting on Monsieur's coat, the latter turned and said:

"I shall come here be more alone, Pierre."